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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TAIPEI 001752

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [CH](#) [TW](#) [TIP](#)

SUBJECT: PRC MEDIA BAN: MAC ADMITS MISTAKE BUT POLICY STANDS

REF: A. TAIPEI 1725

[1](#)B. TAIPEI 1684

Classified By: AIT Director Douglas Paal, Reason: 1.4 (B/D)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Taiwan officials are trying to contain negative political and media fallout from an April 10 announcement that Taipei would ban journalists from PRC-owned Xinhua and the People's Daily in retaliation for Beijing's enactment of the Anti-Secession Law. Mainland Affairs Council (MAC) Chairman Joseph Wu, who unilaterally decided on the measure, acknowledged to AIT that the move was a major PR blunder but said it was too late to reverse the decision without causing even greater embarrassment. Instead, Wu said that Taiwan will try to take "compensatory measures," including expanding the number of Mainland journalists from non-state controlled outlets permitted to be posted in Taipei. Wu said that MAC is looking to give the Newscorp-controlled Phoenix Television an opportunity to post a correspondent "since I know many officials in Washington like Phoenix." Officials from Taiwan's National Security Council (NSC) denied responsibility for Wu's Sunday announcement and said they instructed Wu to take steps to limit the damage. By expelling the PRC journalists, MAC may have unintentionally closed one of its few direct channels to influence opinion in Beijing. End Summary.

Sunday Surprise

[1](#)2. (SBU) MAC Chairman Joseph Wu announced to reporters on April 10 that the government would revoke entry permits for journalists from PRC state-owned Xinhua News Agency and People's Daily in response to their biased coverage of Taiwan's reaction to the Anti-Secession Law. MAC started granting PRC journalists rotating two-month residence permits in 2000, mirroring PRC treatment of Taiwan journalists assigned to the Mainland. MAC expanded the number of PRC reporters eligible to report from Taipei in December 2004, as a "goodwill" gesture to Beijing. Wu's announcement provoked sharp criticism from opposition politicians and many Taiwan media commentators, who decried the move as counter to Taiwan's commitment to freedom of the press (Ref A). While the Government Information Office (GIO) and Pan-Green party spokesmen endorsed Wu's initiative, Premier Frank Hsieh publicly disassociated himself from the proposal, telling reporters it was an NSC decision.

[1](#)3. (C) NSC Senior Advisor for cross-strait affairs Chen Chung-hsin denied Premier Frank Hsieh's accusation that the media decision came from the NSC. Chen acknowledged that Wu raised the idea of restricting visits by "hostile" PRC journalists and academics during an NSC meeting the previous week, but only as an abstract idea rather than a substantive policy proposal. Chen said that NSC Secretary General Chiou I-jen closed the meeting by asking the agencies present to "explore options" for responding to recent PRC "united front" actions. Chen speculated that this may have led Wu to believe he had a tacit NSC approval to proceed. Chen said that after seeing Wu's Sunday announcement, the NSC instructed MAC to look for ways to limit the expected negative domestic and international reaction. Chen said he specifically asked MAC to announce that Taipei will expand the overall number of PRC journalists permitted to report from Taipei.

MAC Tries to Spin Its Way Out

[1](#)4. (C) MAC Vice Chairman David Huang called a press conference April 11 to clarify Wu's Sunday announcement. Huang confirmed Wu's original decision and condemned the two state-owned PRC media organizations for intentionally distorting news from Taiwan, rejecting Beijing's demand to allow the two reporters to stay. However, Huang asserted that MAC remained committed to expanding media exchanges between the two sides and that the recent decision did not signal a major change in policy. MAC Chair Wu contacted AIT late in the evening on April 11 to re-emphasize the latter point. Wu admitted that he had not expected the negative reaction to his April 10 announcement and told AIT he was committed to finding ways to counter charges that MAC was violating media freedoms.

15. (C) Wu said he was particularly fearful that the USG would publicly rebuke Taiwan over the episode, and asked AIT to convey that Taipei will "compensate" for the decision to ban Xinhua and the People's Daily by further expanding the number of PRC journalists from other media outlets allowed to report out of Taipei from the current five. Wu said that in addition to several "reform-minded" journals based in Shanghai and Guangzhou MAC plans to offer Phoenix Television the right to base a correspondent in Taipei. Wu said that he chose Phoenix specifically to allay U.S. concerns, "since I know many officials in Washington like Phoenix." Wu said that, having gone public already, he was not in a position to reverse the decision on Xinhua and People's Daily, at least in the immediate future. Wu acknowledged that his attacks on the two PRC media outlets were a mistake in PR terms, but he remained unapologetic over his criticism of their coverage of Taiwan.

Another Channel Closed Down?

16. (C) While agreeing that the two PRC press organs have used their correspondents in Taipei to generate propaganda on the Mainland, MAC Planning Bureau Director Chang Shu-ti told AIT that their presence has helped communications between Taipei and Beijing. "We know they file two sets of reports," Chang asserted, "one for publication and the other for limited distribution among PRC policy makers." Chang said that Taipei is confident that the classified reports are far more balanced and accurate than the articles written for general consumption. Chang noted that in the past, MAC had tried to exploit their presence in Taipei to convey policy message to PRC counterparts.

Comment: Self-Inflicted Wound

17. (C) Following heavy-handed warnings about prosecuting KMT Vice Chairman P.K. Chiang over his visit to Beijing (Ref B), MAC's April 10 announcement may reinforce the perception of many inside Taiwan and abroad that the Chen administration is over-reacting to recent cross-Strait developments. Wu's policy freelancing also raises questions over NSC claims in recent weeks to have established firm control over the aggressive MAC Chairman. It is also telling that Wu's first concern was domestic media reaction and second was how Washington might respond. Beijing's views were a distant third, if considered at all. MAC attempts to "compensate" for Wu's mistake notwithstanding, Taipei has already suffered a setback in PR terms. The pending expulsion of the two PRC reporters may have also left Taipei with one less channel to convey its views first hand to counterparts on the Mainland. PAAL